

Our Transfigured Lord Descends

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Preached by Derek Jones

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Davenport, IA

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Most mornings, Jesus would head off alone to pray before sunrise. But this morning was different. As he was leaving well before dawn, he woke Peter, James, and John bidding them to follow. Now, these three disciples know Jesus. They have been walking all over the countryside, listening to Jesus' parables, witnessing his miracles, ministering to the crowds which grow larger by the day. They even struck out on their own, commissioned by Jesus to go around healing and teaching in his name. They get it – Jesus is not some ordinary or even extraordinary Rabbi – Jesus is nothing less than the awaited Messiah foretold by the prophets. As Peter confessed just 7 days earlier, “You are the Christ, Son of the living God.”¹ The disciples clearly recognize Jesus – *they* know who he truly is while others just scratch their heads.

By the time they summit the mountain they grow weary in the early morning darkness. While Jesus commences praying, heavy with sleep, the three disciples doze off.² Suddenly they are awakened by a light that could not emanate from the rising sun. As they shake off their drowsiness, they witness Jesus transformed. His face altered, his clothes a dazzling white, Jesus is barely recognizable as he stands before them in full glory. Two others stand with him, Moses and Elijah, who they recognize immediately. The disciples stand awestruck as they overhear these three talking. Peter, recalling the descriptions in the Torah of a tent or tabernacle where God dwelled among the people in the wilderness, suddenly interjects, “Lord, I understand why you have brought us here this morning. There are three of us and three of you in glory. We can build three dwellings where you each can stay and live among us!” Before he can finish his

¹ Matthew 16:16

² Luke 9:28-36

exclamation, a thick, terrifying cloud reminiscent of God's presence on Mount Sinai, descends and engulfs them. In objection to Peter's proposal, a voice like rolling thunder is heard, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"³ And as quickly as it began, this majestic moment ends. Moses and Elijah are gone and the recognizable Jesus stands before them. Unable to utter a word both out of awe and confusion, the three disciples remain silent as Jesus begins his decent off the mountain top. It turns out they really don't know Jesus after all.

In the last letter of his that we have, Peter recalls the transfiguration moment, urging his beloved readers "to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place."⁴ Out of all the moments Peter witnessed, why does he point us to the transfiguration? Why not the feeding of the 5,000 or the blind who were made to see or Lazarus whom he raised from the dead? Why not the healing of the chronically ill or calming of the storm on the sea of Galilee or the walking on water? Why not the torment endured at the crucifixion or the elation of the resurrection or the transcendence of the ascension? Peter chooses the transfiguration as the beacon for believers because it is in this event where the truth about Jesus is revealed – he is God incarnate, the very Word made flesh. The transfiguration is the fullest manifestation of this truth. We cannot understand the crucifixion or the resurrection or the ascension without the transfiguration – that is why it proceeds each of these events in the Gospels. It is the light that illumines these events and enlightens our understanding of their power and efficacy. The transfiguration is good news – God incarnate is with us. But it results in even greater news when that God incarnate *descends* that mountain, down along the dusty roads with the masses, down into the centers of earthly power and oppression, down even into the pits of death to smash open the gates of hell.

No one can capture Jesus. This is the error Peter commits when he seeks to build

³ Matthew 17:5

⁴ 2 Peter 1:19

tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. By building tents where these three would dwell, Peter limits Jesus and the patriarchs of Holy Scripture to HIS vision for God's plan in the world. It is an act that sought to prevent Jesus' departure by ensuring a place where he could always be located. It is an act that would limit Jesus to a particular place and people, his presence only available to those who worship in that space. It is an act that would bind the manifestation of God's kingdom to the traditional ways of the past – reclaiming past practices to augment new claims of authority. “Our tabernacles house the *true* presence of God, you must worship *here* under our guidance instead.” Peter's imagination is limited so his vision for Jesus is limiting. He approaches Jesus backwards – he tries to understand Jesus within the framework he already knows rather than remaking his framework in light of who Jesus is revealed to be.

So often, Peter's error is our own. We use past interpretations and preconceived notions of Scripture to capture Jesus. The stories are familiar, the endings expected, the unsettling parts ignored. The walls and rafters of this church become a tabernacle – a place where others must come to meet God on our terms, a place where history and tradition are preserved, literally set in stone, a place of order and control. Within American Christianity, Jesus has been captured by the dominant discourse and repackaged into anemic, inoffensive bites; Scripture has been usurped by the voices of the power-hungry who interpretations always align conveniently with their ambition; God's kingdom has been confined to a particular space, and time, and people. Jesus is recognizable and we know him.

I was not raised in the Episcopal Church. Growing up in Southern California, I attended one of the ubiquitous so called non-denominational, evangelical churches. I later enrolled in a small Christian, liberal arts college with similar theological leanings. My world was small, both spiritually and interpersonally. I was limited to an individualized relationship with Jesus, and its

only connection to the outside world was with other men—only men—whose faith looked like mine. It wasn't long, however, before this framework began to prove hollow. During a semester abroad in Mexico, I witnessed the women of the neighborhood where I was living care for other families around them as an outpouring of their faith and a powerful embodiment of the Gospel. These women started feeding local children free lunches out of their homes every weekday, their loaves and fishes feeding hundreds. I was also confronted with the desperation of migrants crossing the Sonoran desert into Arizona. I encountered a woman about to cross the border for a five day journey through barren, hostile desert with her two young children. Dumbfounded, I questioned her choice – wasn't she worried her children could die? Without hesitation she responded, "If I stay, they are already dead." My Jesus and the actions and experiences of these women could not be reconciled. My Jesus could not leave that tabernacle, come off that mountain, and walk alongside these women.

The transfiguration is an embodied prophetic message – a lamp shining in a dark place. The light we see in the darkness is the dazzling glory of our transfigured Lord. And yet, as we gaze at this vision of Jesus' majesty, the face we see is not the face we recognize. His face is different than what we expect, altered from that of the Christ we know. In Luke's account of the transfiguration, Jesus' face is literally "othered", a term used to distinguish another person who is different.⁵ It is the same term that Paul uses in Philippians before launching into the great early church doxology about Jesus, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of *the others*. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ."⁶ In other words, his appearance looks like that of another and not like me. Here is the power of the transfiguration for our lives and our communities – it is a potent antidote to our colonizing

⁵ Luke 9:29

⁶ Philippians 2:4

efforts. Any attempt to capture Jesus is really an attempt to make him into my image and the image of my people. But the transfiguration counters – look at Jesus made manifest in the fullness of his divine glory and you will see not yourself but another, not your people but all people, not your land but all lands, not your kingdom but God’s kingdom. The transfiguration reminds us that we must awaken and follow this “othered” Jesus we do not recognize off the mountain so that *we* can be refigured and transformed. Lent is almost upon us. The glorious light in darkness awakens us from slumber to bear witness to the Word made flesh.

Unexpectedly, our Christ casts off this little dwelling we have erected for him and begins his descent into the world and beyond to make all things new. Will we follow?

Amen.